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AUTHOR Greenlaw, M. Jean
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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the term "informational books" in place of the label "nonfiction" and proposes that the difference in connotation might promote a change in students' attitudes toward content reading. Several examples of informational books and their use are provided, showing classroom teachers and librarians how to enhance learning while providing students with reading pleasure. (RT)

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INFORMATION, PLEASE! BOOKS AND THEIR MANY USES

M. Jean Greenlaw

University of Georgia

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Information, Please! Books and Their Many Uses

Information, please! That phrase is not directed just toward a telephone operator but toward a classroom teacher or a librarian. Inquisitive young minds crave new information and there is a world of literature awaiting them. The problem often is that teachers and librarians are not aware of the vast array of informational books that can be used to enhance learning and provide pleasure as well as knowledge.

Informational books have been tagged with the label, non-fiction, for many years. This creates a connotation that these books are not as desirable as fiction, that they are "non-" books in some way. This label might account for the lack of use of these books in the average classroom. A change in attitude might promote a change in use.

The wonders of science can be so much more creatively explored through books that pursue one topic extensively, rather than a textbook that must skim over the top of many subjects. The Blue Lobster, by the Carricks, combines text and watercolors to describe the life cycle of a blue lobster. Skirting anthropomorphism, the book gives a good picture of the danger and problems of growth in the animal world. A Nest of Wood Ducks, by Evelyn Shaw, provides the same type of information about wood ducks. Written in an I-Can-Read format, students at a lower reading level could study the process of the life cycle in this book, and reading

level differences that occur in most classrooms could be nicely handled. In the same vein of the life process, A Chick Hatches is a vivid presentation of the incubation of a chick. Clear, concise text and striking photographs won this book a designation as an ALA Notable Children's Book. The text uses scientific terminology, but combined with the illustrations, even second and third graders can benefit from reading this book.

Another book that incorporates stunning color photographs and minimal text with maximum information, is Desert Life. A wealth of knowledge about the desert is given, although the artful use of white space makes the book seem a simple one to read. Text and photographs compliment and extend each other in a way that few authors master.

Informational books can be used to expand and encourage creativity, in that many are creative in their intent. Is This a Baby Dinosaur? is a book of science picture-puzzles that shows a photograph with a question on one page, and answers the question after you turn the page. The pictures are intended to stimulate speculation and a variety of answers, before the text provides the scientific answer. Carrying this a bit further, Tana Hoban's Look Again! uses a creative format of illustrations in a textless book. The reader first sees a white page with a window cut in it. The window shows a small portion of the illustration underneath, the content of which the reader tries to guess. The white page is turned and the illustration is revealed. Turning the next page places the object in a larger context. An example would be a picture of scales, the fish, and then a goldfish bowl with a child feeding the

fish. The next facing page is another white window page. Classes have been motivated to create their own books using this interesting format.

Individual interests span a world of topics. Knights in Armor takes us back to the Age of Chivalry and gives us an in-depth view of what armor is really like. Tugboats tells us of the variety of tugboats and their importance to shipping. Sure to delight many who have watched them in action. Underground, the latest tour de force of David Macaulay, joins his other award winners by being named an ALA Notable Children's Book. This oversized book gives us a detailed image of just what really is under our feet when we visit a city. The subway system, water pipes, telephone cables, etc. are shown in great detail, and an appreciation of the complexity of our cities emerges. For every individual taste, there is probably an informational book sitting on a shelf waiting to be perused.

Social studies encompasses a wide range of subjects, and informational books abound to supplement or replace the textbook. A study of cultures and the persecution they often face is a topic usually avoided or glossed over in textbooks, but presented with authenticity in informational books. Milton Meltzer has recently written several books that present the story of the Jews in a variety of settings. Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust, is a powerful examination of the extermination of the Jews during World War II. Named an ALA Notable Children's Book and an ALA Best Books for Young Adults, this book is in contention for many additional awards. It is an impassioned chronicle of what many would like to forget, and a few fight to have us remember. Remember the Days is a brief history of the Jews in America and World of Our Fathers tells

of the Jews of Eastern Europe. Two other groups that have undergone persecution, and are in fact almost extinct, are the Cherokees and the Shakers. Alex Bealer tells the shameful tale of how the Cherokees were destroyed as a nation in his simple but moving book, Only the Names Remain. Jane Yolen tells the story of the Shakers in her book, Simple Gifts. Each describes the culture and its differences, and questions why it was necessary for others to destroy them. These are important questions for students growing up in a shrinking world of vastly different cultures.

Another way of perceiving cultures is through their art and ceremonies. The Chinese New Year incorporates the ancient art of Chinese paper cutting in a modern style to depict the three segments of the Chinese New Year. An explanation of the rituals surrounding the month and a half celebration are combined with a brief description of the Chinese zodiac and the the animal signs for the next twelve years. This is another ALA Notable Children's Book. Glubok and Tamarin have combined talents to trace the Olympics back to their origin in ancient Greece. They have chosen a setting of 400 B.C., though they move back and forth in time to describe additions and deletions in the games, and to include tales of the feats of outstanding athletes. The use of photographs of vases, statues, and excavations, and models of ancient Greece adds a dimension to the book. One gets a feel for the setting and gains a perspective attained in no other way.

Biography for children and young adults long has belonged more to the fiction category than to the informational book category. Books

liberally spattered with conversations no one could have recorded and deletions of facts thought to be disturbing to young minds resulted in the creation of a pseudo-genre called biographical fiction. Recent years have seen an emergence of sound biographical works for children and young adults. Well researched and authentically written, books such as Friend and Peter, the Revolutionary Tsar provide facinating reading as well as accurate information. Such books give research sources, index the information and suggest additional readings for the person wanting to gain further information. It is proven possible to create biographies for this age.

A creative new approach to bookmaking has been accomplished by Jörg Müller. In two portfolios of large foldout pictures, Müller traces The Changing City over 23 years in eight pictures, and The Changing Countryside over 19 years in seven pictures. Depicting the same location every three years, he shows us the gradual, but overwhelming changes that occur in the name of progress. These materials can provide the basis for far-reaching and intensive discussion of the effects of change. The art is beautiful and the effect is stunning.

The tip of the iceberg has been touched, (I'm sure you could find several informational books on icebergs) but the scope of informational books extends beyond the limits of one article. The best and most interesting approach to the subject is to get into the library and read. Then encourage your students to do the same.

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